Traffic Congestion

Traffic congestion is getting worse throughout the country and is becoming a major concern of the American public. Anti-road groups often cite traffic congestion as one of the biggest problems caused by rapid growth of neighborhoods and communities. These anti-growth groups advocate policies to restrict road-capacity improvements and devote that funding instead to transit, bicycling, and other alternatives to driving. The best way to reduce traffic congestion, however, is through better long-term regional planning that incorporates a comprehensive approach to expand and improve all aspects of our nation's transportation system.

Traffic Congestion

Background

Traffic congestion is getting worse throughout the country and is becoming a major concern of the American public. Recent public opinion polls nationwide show consistently that increased traffic congestion is among the top two or three factors people cite as having a major impact on their daily lives.

A 1999 study by the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) shows that traffic congestion is no longer just a big city problem: Traffic congestion is growing in small- and medium-sized markets at an even faster rate than in urban areas. Increasingly, major roads are becoming congested, and rush hours are lengthening.

Anti-road groups cite traffic congestion as one of the biggest problems caused by rapid growth of neighborhoods and communities. These groups advocate policies to restrict road-capacity improvements and impose or encourage high-density and mixed-use developments designed to make transit, bicycling, and walking more practical as alternatives to driving.

The Myth

"You can't build your way out of congestion," or, "Build it and they will come." These two phrases summarize the theory of induced travel. Building more roads leads to an increased number of cars and vehicle travel, thereby exacerbating congestion and increasing development.

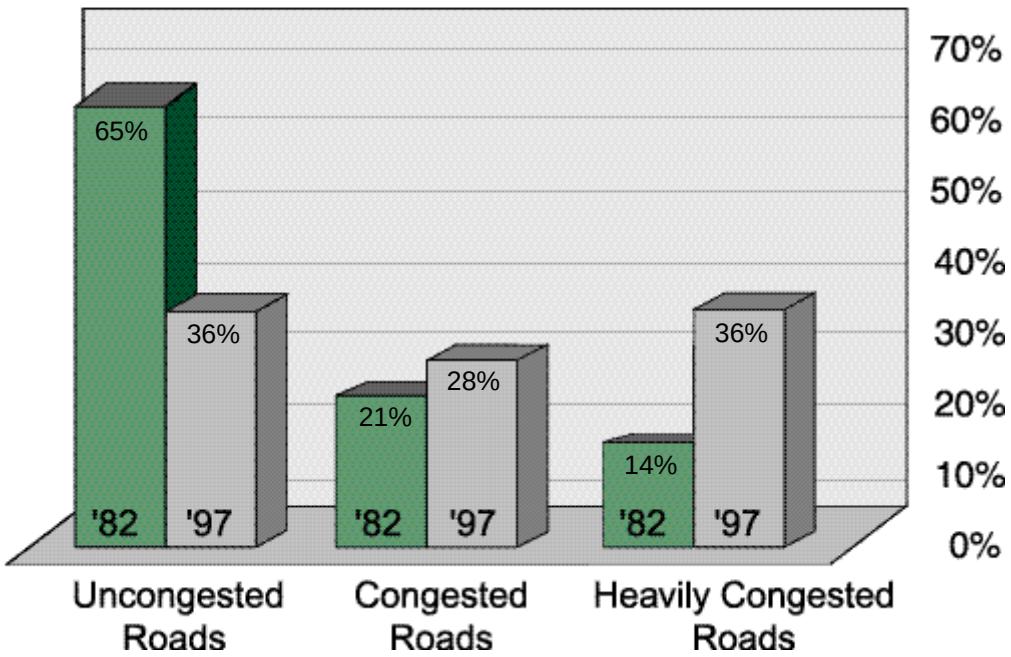
The Facts

Traffic congestion is growing nationwide, leading to increased costs to motorists in wasted time and fuel use.

According to TTI (1999):

- More than 31 percent of urban freeways throughout the country are congested.
- Traffic congestion costs motorists more than $72 billion a year in wasted time and fuel costs.
- Americans waste more than 4.3 billion hours per year stuck in traffic—approximately 34 hours per driver.

Congestion is Increasing in 70 of the Nation's Largest Urban Areas



Source: Texas Transportation Institute

- The amount of time motorists in small- and medium- sized cities spend stalled in traffic has more than quadrupled since 1982, and this figure is growing at a much faster rate than in larger cities.

Highway travel in the United States is growing and will continue to grow in the years ahead.

- Over the past quarter-century, highway travel in the United States has increased by 131 percent and the population has increased by 32 percent, while road mileage has grown from 3,730,082 miles in 1970 to 3,944,601 miles in 1997, an increase of just 5.7 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 1990; U.S. Department of Transportation).
- The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the population of the United States will grow by 60 million people between 1995 and 2020.
- Highway travel is forecasted to increase about 40 percent by 2015, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Building new roads and improving existing roads are effective ways of reducing traffic congestion and enhancing transportation efficiency; new and improved roads have only a limited effect on inducing new travel demand.

- While traffic congestion is worsening across the country, according to the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), cities that have aggressively added road capacity in response to regional growth have had smaller increases in congestion than have other areas.
- A 1998 Federal Highway Administration report found that increased vehicle travel on expanded road capacity is largely the result of traffic being diverted from nearby routes or from shifts in travel times. Diverting traffic reduces overall regional traffic congestion. The study concluded that only 5 to 13 percent of the new traffic on expanded urban highways is attributable to new highway travel actually induced by the expanded capacity.
- A study by the University of Illinois at Chicago (1998) of regional development patterns in the Chicago area did not find a connection between road building and rapid growth of neighborhoods and communities. Chicago has experienced tremendous suburban growth despite the lack of any new urban highways. This study concluded that urban decentralization was caused largely by increasingly affluent residents and businesses pursuing their preferences in lifestyles, environments, and community amenities.
- The General Accounting Office (1999), an investigative arm of Congress, recently concluded that many factors contribute to urban dispersal. The relationships among these factors are so complex that it is very difficult to assess what roles are played by individual factors, such as highway development.

Our Position

The best way to reduce traffic congestion is through better long-term regional planning that incorporates a comprehensive approach to expand and improve our nation's transportation system. To achieve this goal, we should use all of the tools at our disposal, including computerized traffic signals and new computer technology to improve traffic flow, additional turn lanes at crowded intersections, safer and more convenient transit, and, where appropriate, wider roads and new roads. This also includes strategies in the private sector to promote options that do not involve the use of our transportation system, such as employee flextime and telecommuting.

Endnotes

Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 1997,* Washington, D.C.

General Accounting Office. (1999). *Community Development: Extent of Federal Influence on "Urban Sprawl" is Unclear.* <www.gao.gov>.

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University of Illinois at Chicago, Urban Transportation Center. (1998).